

2013 Letters About Literature Level 3 winner

Melissa Burrough's letter to Sarah Dessen, author of *Just Listen*

January 6, 2013

Sarah Dessen
c/o Penguin Group Publishers
345 Hudson Street
New York, NY 10014

Dear Sarah Dessen,

I could hear my mom's clear, bright voice as she sang along with her favorite CD while cleaning the bathroom or paying the bills. She whistled whatever song was stuck in her head as she answered emails. My dad sang as he cooked dinner or did laundry. His favorite CD of the week played while he sat outside in summertime. My mother sang words to read songs or whistled read tunes, but my father preferred to make up both the words and the tune as he went along. The obvious joy that music brought my parents touched me as a child, and this joy stayed with me as I grew older.

When it was time to fill out registration cards for middle school, my mom encouraged me to sign up for band class. She played violin in high school, so she knew how fulfilling a school music program could be. My dad also encouraged me to pursue an instrument; he had played the banjo for a short while, but he was also a ballroom dance instructor who enjoyed music. After much debate, I chose to play the clarinet, hoping that I, too, could fill the house with music.

I continued to play all through middle school, and I signed up for both Concert Band and Marching Band when I reached high school. The beginning of high school was when I really fell in love with music. The band director then, Mr. Jackson, was so passionate about music and teaching. His passion was infectious, and soon I was devoted to band. I learned about more than just music during the six short months I knew him.

With his death came an awful silence. It was as if, after a magnificent crescendo, the entire ensemble dropped out, creating an impossibly loud silence. During this silence, music

began to lose some of its importance in my life. Music and band class weren't the same. Without him, band seemed empty and insignificant. Music was meaningless and dull without him to bring it to life.

During this deafening silence, I reread your novel, *Just Listen*. I had read this book before, but this time I focused more on Owen and his anger management problems. I noticed that music calmed him down; in a way, Owen depended on music more than any single person. Owen used music as a way to escape his reality.

Reading about Owen's love for and dependence on music, I realized what music can do for you. Music can allow you to escape your reality, if only for a short while. Listening to music can help you forget about your everyday problems and fears. For a while, this is how I used music---as a way to block out the pain I felt from losing such an influential person in my life. Eventually, though, I realized that avoiding my true feelings wasn't really helping me. I discovered that I had to really be honest with myself and face my painful emotions.

Music then became a way to remember him. Once I was able to accept the pain of losing him, I was able to see that listening to and playing the music he loved so dearly would help me remember him and stay close to him. My new goal was to attempt to make Mr. Jackson proud of me.

I allowed myself to be immersed in music again. I began to enjoy band again. Playing music for an audience was amazing. Like Owen trying to enlighten his audience, I felt satisfied that I could change, or at least affect, those who listened to my music.

In time, I learned that Owen was right. As he so eloquently put it, "Silence is so freaking loud." So why not fill it with beautiful music?

Sincerely,

Melissa Burroughs